SEQUENTIAL

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Category: Stranger Things, 2016
Genre: Drama, Romance
Language: English
Characters: J. Hopper, M. Brenner, OC, Will B.
Pairings: J. Hopper/OC
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2019-07-09 22:39:27
Updated: 2019-09-11 21:21:25
Packaged: 2019-12-12 17:32:25
Rating: T
Chapters: 5
Words: 20,170
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Molly Davis appears to be a normal resident of Hawkins, Indiana. She teaches at the middle school, cheers on the local football team, and flirts with the town's chief of police. No one knows the actual truth about her. No one knows that twenty years ago, she escaped from Hawkins National Laboratory. Back then, she wasn't known as Molly. Her name was Subject 001.

1. Molly Davis

A/N: I know, I know, I have too many stories. But I've had this one in my head for a couple years and season 3 of Stranger Things just really got to me. I hope you all enjoy Molly as much as I do!

"*Life is to be lived, not controlled;*
and humanity is won by continuing
to play in face of certain defeat."

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Chapter One
Molly Davis

"*Do you want me to remove the muzzle?"*

The girl nodded fervently, catching the scent of metal from the bit in her mouth. Every morning, every evening, every night, she tasted it and smelled it and fought against it. And yet it remained, unchanged.

Sometimes she forgot the sound of her voice.

Sometimes she forgot she could even speak.

"*Do you remember what happened last time?"*

The girl nodded again, slowly this time.

"*You almost killed Doctor Samson, did you know that?"*

She shook her head once.

"*If you do it again, I can't promise I'll ever be able to remove this. Do you want to wear this for the rest of your life?"*

She shook her head.

"*So, you promise to behave?"*

She nodded once.

"*Good."*

Slowly, hands unclasped the contraption, pulling the metal gently away. Her teeth ached and her throat was dry, the taste of free air stung her flesh, and it was the greatest sensation she could imagine.

Until she began to speak…

September 6, 1983

"What are words?"

Molly Davis wrote the sentence on the board, underlining it with an extra layer of chalk. No one answered the question, but she did not expect them to. It was the beginning of the year, after all. All questions were optional, rhetorical, and immediately tossed into the ignore bin. English was never the most popular subject, but she liked a good challenge.

Some of the children were glancing out the window, watching their last days of summer disappear from the wrong side of the glass. Others were staring at the tops of their desks, taking in the grain like it was far more fascinating. Will Byers was the only one paying her any real attention. The kid had an imagination on him, and it would take him far one day.

"Are they just randomly arranged letters, a simple tool for one person to understand what another needs, or is there more to them? Are they an idea, an actual piece of humanity, a glimpse into the soul?"

Someone snickered in the back.

"I know, I know, a little overdramatic for the first day of school. C'mon, Miss Davis, we haven't even started Shakespeare yet," she paused, watching the inevitable less-than-enthusiastic reaction to everyone's favorite playwright. "Oh no, there go the eyes glazing over. If only Bill could see how far he's fallen."

Will smiled at that, and she gave him a friendly wink.

Molly leaned against her desk, grabbing a pen from the surface and holding it up. "Anyone care to describe this pen for me? Melissa?"

In the back corner, blonde curls bounced as the owner looked up. "It's…red?"

Molly lifted her free hand, gesturing toward her student. "That's right, it's red. Color is one of the best descriptive devices available to us. Straight, simple, to the point, but it doesn't have to be. Red doesn't do all the shades justice. There's a difference between the red of this pen and the red of my hair.

"Is this pen *really* red? *Very* red? Well, those are just as boring as saying *red*, now aren't they?"

There were some nods. The audience was slowly coming to.

Jumping off the desk, Molly displayed the pen in front of her like a prized possession.

"The possibilities for describing the red of this pen are endless, and therein lies the beauty of it. How do you choose the word to describe it? Does any word work or do you choose something that just feels right to you?

"Let's say someone described this pen as *super* red, what do you think that says about them? Why would they use the word *super*?"

Will shrugged. "Maybe they like comic books?"

"Excellent observation, Mister Byers," Molly replied with a nod. "Superman, Super Friends, superheroes. What better way to describe something as greater than what it is than by adding the word *super* before it?"

She gestured to a red-headed boy in the front row. "Derek, is your dad still the best mechanic in town?"

The boy nodded, smiling with pride. "You know it."

"Does he describe a car as just red?"

Derek shook his head. "Flaming red."

"*Flaming*," Molly echoed. "The perfect description for a mechanic or car enthusiast, loud, masculine, dangerous. But probably not the right word for someone who prefers *rose* red. What sort of person do you think that is?"

"Probably gay."

Molly felt her eyes narrow as she glanced to the back where two boys snickered in unison.

"Now, Troy, I was hoping we could make it through the first week before I had to install the expressway to the principal's office, but I guess you had different plans. C'mon, step into the hall. I'll talk with you in a minute."

She watched the boy stand up, shuffling forward with a grin that spoke of no regrets on his face. He was quite proud of himself, despite having to repeat this course. His mother had given her hell for it, but Molly had faced worse monsters in her lifetime. Wailing parents were nothing to her.

The mood broken, Molly moved back behind her desk, gathering her thoughts.

"Words are how we communicate to the world around us, how we communicate *about* the world around us, and in turn, they are also how we tell the world about ourselves without even meaning to. If you ask William Shakespeare, Stephen King, and J.R.R. Tolkien to describe any object, you're going to get drastically different answers, because it is their preference and it is what feels right to them as an author, as a person. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why we force you to take English classes until you're legally an adult."

She watched the various pairs of eyes looking up at her, blue eyes, brown eyes, some with glasses, most without. Once, she had been in their position, in that very room if she recalled correctly. School had been her sanctuary, her everything, and English class was her favorite. After being denied the use of words for so long, that young girl she had been could not learn about them fast enough.

That was why she never minded when her students seemed bored. Boring was safe; boring was the best outcome she could hope for.

Molly grinned. "Now, how about you all tell me about yourselves with that colorful description in essay form!"

Groans. Music to her ears every time.

"I want three to five paragraphs from each of you describing your favorite events from the summer," she called out, grabbing pencils for the inevitable children who were short them. "Will, only one of those can be a Dungeons and Dragons campaign. And no, Tina, reading about an event does not count as an event. You had to leave your house at some point."

It was always on County Road 16, when the lanes straightened out and took her through the open fields on the edge of her land, that Molly would see him.

She didn't know where he came from, if he parked on some side road and waited for her old pickup to lumber through or if he'd followed her from somewhere back in town; she never actually paid it much attention. But in the back of her mind, she came to expect a visit every once in a while, which was what kept her from jumping when red and blue lights began to pulse in her rearview mirror.

Smiling, Molly pulled off to the side, careful not to turn too far. The road hardly had a shoulder and dipped quickly into the grassy fields below. She wasn't in any danger from traffic anyway. Maybe five cars in total used it on a daily basis, and Hawkins wasn't exactly known for attracting outside attention.

Chief Jim Hopper took his time exiting his Chevy – he seemed to increase her wait by at least a minute every meeting – so Molly reached for the bag on her seat and grabbed out some classwork. She might as well get some work done while he wasted her time.

Well, maybe wasted was a harsh term. It couldn't be all that bad if she was smirking the whole time.

When she finally glanced him sauntering – yes, that was the appropriate word – toward her truck through the side view mirror, Molly had already read through three essays.

Definitely adding time.

Molly rolled the window down, and was greeted by a very stern gentleman, his aviators on and pen and paper out, ready to dispense his small amount of justice.

"License and registration, ma'am."

Hopper was so full of shit, she almost started laughing.

"You know, Jim, when I get pulled over for an actual offense one of these days, I'm going to wind up handcuffed on the hood of my truck because I don't know how to properly interact with an officer of the law anymore."

In the beginning, their meeting had been for a legitimate reason. He'd caught her speeding down the same stretch of road a couple years back, but she had been driving a convertible then. It had been the same the next two times as well. Then he had pulled her over as a joke, and now here they were, chatting on the same abandoned county road like it was the most normal thing they could do.

"That implies you're capable of leaving Hawkins," Hopper countered, flipping open his little notebook. He even began to write something. "Who's gonna pull you over here? You so much as speak to Phil, he might faint."

"Your confidence in Hawkins PD is stirring."

He leveled a look on her. "License and registration."

She tossed the essays at him in response, allowing herself a small giggle as he struggled to keep them all in line.

"The hell are these?" he asked, sifting through them.

"Essays from my students."

"What's today, the first day of school?" Hopper asked, tossing the papers back. Molly let the sheets flutter around and fall in the cab. Not like they were going anywhere now. "You giving kids homework on the first day?"

"It's hardly homework if I have it right now, Jim," Molly replied with a shake of her head. "No, I do it every year. I ask the kids to write about themselves. It gives me an idea about what they like, how committed they are, what their comprehension level is, and that way I can plan from there."

Hopper nodded slowly, possibly comprehending what she had said, possibly not. She could still smell the beer on his breath.

Her smile faltered. "Should I ask you for one?"

The chief snorted, removing his sunglasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Get past the terrible handwriting and I'm not sure you'll like what you read."

"Well, that's up for me to decide," Molly replied, reaching out and grabbing the notebook from him.

"Hey! That's interfering with a criminal investigation."

"I'm sure you'll get over it," Molly said half-heartedly, reading over the scrawl. She recognized the poorly written name of her college. "'Ohio State sucks.' Seriously, Jim?"

He looked smug. "Just recording the facts of the situation."

"Michigan fans," she mumbled, throwing the notebook back at him. "Have you even been to Michigan?"

"I see it on the map every now and then."

Molly shook her head, crossing her arms over the open window. She watched his blue eyes focus on hers, the cheeriness quickly fading, and wondered how late he had been up this time.

Jim Hopper was a strange case. He was simultaneously the simplest creature and the most complex enigma. Molly liked to think she

understood him to an extent, through their brief conversations and whatever Patty deemed necessary gossip – not that she had asked for it. The woman lived for trouble and if you so much as made eye contact with someone new, she would give you a briefing complete with slides.

But there was always a wall she would hit. She liked to think the man cared in some way – he kept pulling her over for small talk after all- but he'd always shrink away, and she wasn't quite sure how to address that. Maybe he didn't know either.

"I'd say yes, you know."

For a while, she had thought the small talk was going to lead up to just that: a question about dinner or coffee, but it never did. She'd been disheartened by it at first, even when she hadn't known what her answer would be. Jim Hopper, after all, had a well-known reputation around town: drinking, abuse of medication, an overall disinterest in anything he did. A glowing resume for a prospective partner, but he made her laugh, and after everything her life had been, that went a long way with Molly.

It was only when she started paying attention, truly, and actually listening to Patty's words that she realized Hopper's behavior around her was atypical of the brutish chief. He was almost charming, which was not a word anyone would describe him with.

She realized then how serious their meetings were, and how profound his resistance to asking truly was.

"Yeah," he replied, sounding defeated. "I know."

He put his aviators back on and turned to his vehicle, the moment clearly at an end. Molly resisted the urge to grab his arm.

There had been a point where she didn't know people, emotions and facial expressions were as difficult to read as Russian, but over the years, she had become quite proficient at the art. Hopper was not the sort of man to give in to pity. It only made him disappear further behind that immense wall he had built. So, she bunched her hands into fists and counted the loose rocks on the asphalt.

"So, I'll see you at the bar later?" she asked when he had returned to his car.

Hopper stared at her from over the open door. "It's the first day of school, Miss Davis."

Molly only grinned, turning back into her truck.

The vehicle roared to life, climbing onto the road and kicking up dust in its wake. Through the rearview mirror, she could still see Hopper standing there.

He was shaking his head, but she thought there may have been a smile on his face.

It was another two miles to the farmhouse she called home, straight through fields of corn. When her father passed, Molly began to rent the land to her neighbors, although they were all beginning to feel the squeeze from the mayor. Modern innovations for modern times, they said. Hawkins was apparently growing, and growth demanded expansion, at the cost of their farmland.

Molly didn't want to sell the land. She liked the isolation it offered her. Easier to see who was coming that way.

Also, a shopping mall did not sound remotely appealing.

Molly killed the engine in the dirt driveway, listening as the sound of birds and wind blowing through the trees returned to her ears. She used to hate the quiet of it all. Sometimes she still did. It reminded her of too much.

Packing the papers back into her bag, Molly watched the house a moment. Two stories, white as can be, front porch complete with a swing. Americana at its finest.

It looked the same as it had that morning, but she could never take appearances for granted.

Letting her bag sink back into the seat, Molly reached over for the glove compartment under the dash and popped it open. Her hand

returned with an M1911 pistol, a relic from her father's tours in World War II.

Only then did she head for her house.

With a steady and practiced grip on her pistol, Molly methodically searched the outside of the building, calmly checking through each screened window for anything out of place. Her orange tabby, O'Malley, was sleeping soundly in the bay window, blissfully unaware of her presence.

She checked the storm cellar as well, but the door was locked, and had been for the last four years.

Satisfied with her perimeter sweep, Molly unlocked her front door, quietly, and stepped inside.

The pistol pulled close, her dominant eye fully focused down the sights, Molly began to clear each room of the ground floor, before moving her investigation upstairs. Her finger tapped just above the trigger well, ready for anything, but today, like every day since she had returned, the house was hiding nothing but dust bunnies and memories.

With a sigh, Molly allowed herself to relax, arms dropping to her sides.

Just another day in Hawkins, Indiana.

So, this was just an introductory chapter to Molly in her present day. We'll get more into her backstory next time. Thanks for reading!

2. The End and the Beginning

A/N: I don't know where this kick is coming from, but I better not waste it! Thanks to everyone who followed, favorited, and reviewed! You are all wonderful people!

We're getting a bit more of Molly's background here, as well as more of her life in Hawkins. The main plot of the show will come soon enough, but I really like to establish the character's life first.

Enjoy!

Chapter Two
The End and the Beginning

On the thirteenth of June 1963, a fourteen-year-old girl walked out of Hawkins National Laboratory. It was eleven thirty in the morning and at the time, there were one hundred forty-seven staff members on shift, plus an additional thirty security personnel. Not a single individual lifted a finger to stop her, and when later questioned about her mysterious breakout, most could not recall having seen her. Only one confused janitor remembered someone walking out in an overly large lab coat.

This girl walked for five miles and came across twenty-six cars. Every concerned citizen pulled over to ask after her – after all, one does not normally run into a girl clad in nothing but a hospital gown and white coat – but every inquiry was turned away, leaving them to drive on and never think about her again. Except for Walter Johnson, who swore up and down that a girl with incredibly short hair spoke to him that day, though he did not know where.

Across fields and through scant patches of forest, the girl continued. Though she wore no shoes, she did not cry out when a twig or a jagged rock cut into her exposed skin; she did not stop when her feet began to bleed, leaving a small trail on the piles of fallen leaves. But she stumbled and fell often, spilling the eight leather-bound notebooks in her possession. With an air of panic every time, she would gather her belongings and search every direction for potential

danger.

Her travels brought her to the edge of a cornfield. As it was still early in the season, the tips of the stalks barely grazed her kneecaps.

She stopped, staring at the expanse of green growing before her. A gentle breeze whipped the hospital gown around her legs. It was thick and smelled of an impending storm.

Slowly, she stepped forward, trudging down the neatly planted rows toward the distant farmhouse. That was, until she heard something behind her.

Now, to most people, the creature she encountered upon turning around would be identified as a dog, a mutt in fact, with so many breeds in its bloodline, it was difficult to tell what they may have been. But it was large and black, with sharp canines that stood stark against its fur when it growled.

However, the girl had never seen a dog. Not physically or in picture form, and hadn't even heard the word spoken to her, so as far as she was concerned, it was the most terrifying thing she had ever encountered.

So, she ran.

Panting, she fled down the steady stream of corn to the farmhouse, but the dog rapidly gained as her energy waned.

Her feet gave out, and she felt into the dirt, notebooks flying out of her grasp and into the cornstalks. Immediately, she flipped over into a sitting position, raising her arms to defend herself from the attack.

"Stop!"

With a whine, the dog came to a halt. It pawed at the dirt, head jerking at an unseen restraint, but drew no closer to the girl.

She lowered her arms, watching the creature struggle with curiosity.

"Mac! Where'd you run off to?!" a voice called from somewhere down the field. On the ground, the corn obscured the girl's view. "Damn

mutt can't stay in place for one minute. Mac!"

The dog began to bark, loudly and deep. It sent the girl into a panic, and she stood abruptly, running to grab her discarded notebooks. She hastily picked them up, not bothering to brush the dirt from their pages, and resumed her dash down the field.

"Hey! Hey, you, stop!" the man shouted, but his calls were disobeyed. However, the girl, once again, found herself unable to outrun her pursuer, and she quickly found a large hand grasping her shoulder, dragging her to a halt and turning her around.

Charlie Davis was a man who believed there was nothing left in the world that could surprise him, and if there happened to be, he didn't want to be anywhere near it. After suffering through both the Great Depression and the Second World War, he bought a farm in a hidden corner of the country and left the remaining troubles in the world to sort themselves out. As far as he was concerned, he had given enough of his life to righting wrongs.

However, when he laid eyes on the girl, Charlie realized that the world still had plenty to show him.

Her eyes were blue, bright, and wide with fear, and her red hair had been shorn to nearly the scalp. She was skinny, far too skinny as far as he was concerned, her cheeks hollow and complexion pale.

"What the hell…"

The girl snarled. "Let me go!"

Like he was in a dream. That was how Charlie would later describe the sensation that fell over him. While he originally had no intention of listening to the girl's cry, as it was clearly not in her best interest or his, he was suddenly overcome with the strange feeling and watched on as his hand obeyed the girl's command. Someone was pulling the strings, and it certainly was not him.

Without missing a beat, the girl continued to run. She crossed over a few of the corn rows, as if denying him a straight path to her would stop him from catching up once more.

He watched her, stunned, before shaking his head and chasing after her again. He didn't question why he ran after this strange girl. All his life, Charlie had listened to his instincts, and had gotten out of more than his fair share of scrapes because of it. When that little voice in the back of his head said jump, he jumped, when it said run, he ran like hell was chasing him. Currently it was screaming at him to not let that girl get away, and he'd be damned if he started ignoring it now.

"Wait!" he shouted, jumping over the corn. The girl did not pause as she hit his lawn and began to run through the backyard of his home. It was only when Mac launched past him and cut off her escape that the girl came to a halt, backing away from the mutt, clearly distressed. As his dog began to bark at her, she flinched, juggling the notebooks in her grasp as they began to fall.

"Get back!" Charlie shouted at the mutt, snapping his fingers in its direction. "Get away from her. C'mon!"

Mac backed off slightly, though he still continued to bark.

"Quiet!"

That got to the mutt. With one more muffled 'boof,' his dog backed off and trotted to his side.

The girl watched the dog, then looked to him with curious eyes. "You can do it too?"

Charlie blinked. "Do what?"

"Control."

He remembered the field.

"No, I…I just trained him. What you did was…people don't do that. People don't…what did you do to me?"

She shrugged. "Control."

"Right, yeah, control. That's one word for it," he replied, resting his hands on his hips as he took a breath. He watched the weather vane

on the barn begin to turn rapidly and heard a crack of thunder in the distance. "You got a name, kid?"

He didn't bother asking about family; he doubted she had one.

She blinked at him, confused, and then looked very thoughtful and sullen. Eventually, her shoulders fell a little as her hands still fussed with the notebooks.

"One."

1983

The Hideaway Pub had closed maybe twenty minutes ago, far earlier than was the norm, but at the time, only the usual crowd was occupying it and the owner, Tom Hanson, had decided he didn't want any more interruptions for the evening.

Besides, he had his hands full enough as it was.

Benny Hammond sighed, chalking up his pool cue and lining up his shot. Molly stood on the other side of the table, hands clutching either side, leaning in so she could be certain Benny saw her in his shot. To her right, leaning against the wall with a beer, Henry Mason began to chuckle, while Earl watched them from the comfort of his seat at the bar, his conversation with Tom paused as they watched the shenanigans.

At least once a week, the group found themselves in the pub. They never picked a particular day, most of them just happened to occupy the place more often than not. Hopper was the only one not present at the time, causing Benny and Molly to place bets on whether or not he would join them for the evening.

"It's not rocket science, Benny," Molly said, grinning as the cue wavered slightly. "Just tap it in the hole."

Henry shook his head, shuffling over to the bar.

"Psychological warfare is not allowed in the game of billiards," Benny mumbled, taking another few seconds to line up his shot before

gently tapping the cue ball. He hit his target, the striped red ball, but fell short of dropping it into the pocket.

Molly raised her eyebrows as Benny stood, staring her down. The man liked to think he was intimidating, and many people in town would agree with that assessment, but Molly had never thought that about the man. One look at him and she could tell he was soft, only rough around the edges.

Hawkins seemed to have a few of those.

"I'm getting Jim to put a restraining order on you," Benny said, pointing. "You're no longer allowed within five feet of me when I'm making a shot."

"Excuses," Molly replied, grabbing her cue off the wall. She spun it briefly in her hands before quickly lining up her shot and sinking the solid yellow.

"Face it, Benny, the woman's a hustler," Earl called from the bar. "And you fall for it every time."

"She has to lose one of these days," Benny said, watching as Molly called and sank the eight ball, ending the match.

Henry chuckled again. "Just not today."

With a wink, Molly tossed her cue at Benny before crossing back over to the bar where a fresh beer waited for her, courtesy of Tom. She tipped the bottle to him before taking a swig, leaning back on the wall behind her. She glanced up at the television, watching the White Sox finish up a late game.

Earl knocked back a shot, leveling a look on her. "So, how is it a teacher is out at the bar on school nights?"

Molly blinked, her brow furrowing. "I feel like we've had this conversation before. Have we had this before?"

"You did," Benny said, sliding onto the stool next to her. "Earl hit the poison a little too hard that night."

Nodding, Molly could see the memory forming in her mind. "Was that the same night you almost drowned in your sink?"

The boys chuckled while Earl could only shrug.

"How was I supposed to know Susan hadn't drained the damn thing after she did the dishes?"

The whole group began to laugh at that, each taking their turn to drink when it fell quiet.

Molly couldn't remember the exact night she had started hanging out with this group of drunks in the evenings. Some time after her father died, she figured, when she was feeling out of sorts and needed to be somewhere that wasn't home. It was easy to connect with men like the ones she sat with. Charlie, after all, had been just like them, and would have probably been sitting with them now if he were still alive. He'd have drank twice as much, and been twice as sober than them anyway.

The quiet was interrupted by the sound of someone pulling on the door, hard. Clearly, they hadn't been expecting it to be locked, and quiet curses could be heard through the glass.

"Jim's here," Molly said, smiling as she took another drink.

"Hey now, it could be any drunk without a life out there," Benny countered, watching the door.

They waited.

"Let me in, you assholes!" shouted a very familiar voice.

"Or just our drunk," Molly said, holding out her hand as Tom went to unlock the door. "Pay up."

Hopper stumbled inside as five pairs of eyes watched him, all various levels of amused. She heard him awkwardly clear his throat as he continued inside, getting pats on the shoulder from the other boys as he ambled over to Molly and Benny. He was dressed in his standard attire when he wasn't working: jeans and a flannel shirt. Never mind that it was humid as hell outside. The man had his preferences.

"The hell is this?" Hopper asked as Benny put a ten in her hand.

"Just a little bit of hustling," Molly replied, pocketing the money in her own jeans. "How was your date?"

Hopper flinched at her slight emphasis on the word, making that scrunched up face of his, the 'I'm caught and don't have a way out' face.

Molly knew that most women would have been offended at how their relationship functioned, and they would have been justified in their anger. From all outward appearances, Hopper was stringing her along, flirting with her one moment while taking out another woman in the next. But really, it was those women who Molly felt for. Hopper took care not to drag her down into his problematic world, but the others were not exempt. It didn't happen often, but it would also never last more than a week, if it got that far.

Still, they were all adults, and all capable of making bad decisions and living with it. Molly wasn't putting her life on hold for him, and he wasn't putting his life on hold either. They just were, and she was okay with that.

Besides, she might have been willing to say yes, but a part of her was afraid of the after. Turns out starting a relationship with a very large secret was not the best way to go about things.

It tended not to end well.

Hopper smacked his lips. "It was…yeah…Benny, can I have a word?"

With a shrug, Benny got up from his barstool. Molly watched the two men walk toward the back of the bar. Hopper lit up a cigarette while Benny started another game of pool. She watched them start talking, meeting Hopper's eyes every now and again. There was something very high school about it all, the smoking and drinking included.

"So," Earl started, clearing his throat. "Care to answer that question of mine?"

Molly smiled, shaking her head and finishing off her beer. Strange as this life may have seemed, it was happy and she wouldn't trade it for

anything.

"How are things with Jim?"

Molly nearly spit out her coffee, instead swallowing it too quickly and coughing as the liquid almost went down the wrong way. She glanced around the diner for any witnesses to her embarrassing moment, but aside from one curious child, most of the patrons were occupied by their own discussions. It was Sunday morning, after all, just after the churches got out of service, so everyone had crowded what restaurants were open to have polite conversation over breakfast. The place was practically buzzing.

"I don't know, Patty," Molly replied, putting her mug down before she could hurt herself further. "I'm fairly certain you see him more often than I do."

The receptionist gave her a look. "The boys say otherwise."

The boys being Officers Callahan and Powell, of course. They gossiped like women.

Molly gave her friend a look of her own as she stabbed her soggy waffles with a fork. "The boys or Flo?"

"The boys told Flo, and she told me," Patty replied, leaning closer. "Does he really pull you over just to talk?"

She took a large bite out of the waffle, chewing obnoxiously. "Would it make any difference if I said no?"

Patty smiled, looking giddy at the idea of it all. Everyone in town was a terrible gossip, but her friend was slightly worse. She also read all those ridiculous romance novels.

It was just another part of their weekend ritual. They would meet up at the diner at the same time every Sunday and chat, usually about her because apparently working at the coroner's office wasn't interesting enough, before heading out to grab groceries together. Even if Patty's overzealous behavior got the best of her at times, she truly enjoyed herself with the woman. There was something so

normal about their get-togethers. It made her feel like she really fit into the routine of the town.

After returning from Ohio, it had been difficult to adjust. Cincinnati wasn't quite like Hawkins. And, of course, she had never been quite like everyone else.

"Don't give me that look, Patty," Molly said, pushing her plate away. "It's nothing."

"No, nothing is what Marissa has. That poor woman can't even get him to call her back," Patty countered, pulling out her wallet. "While you practically have the chief eating out of the palm of your hand. Say the word, and he'll do just about anything for you."

The irony left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"Do you have any idea how many women around here would kill for that?" her friend continued, waving down the waitress for more coffee.

"A shocking amount, according to the looks I get," Molly replied, glancing out the window.

There was another reason she preferred the company of the men at the bar. While she was respected enough as a teacher, the housewives of Hawkins did not seem to like her as much as a person. Perhaps it was because she was in her thirties and still unmarried – a topic that the principal had been forced to bring up on more than one occasion, as if her marital status had anything to do with her teaching ability – or because she dressed differently, but mostly she believed it had been because of her easygoing nature with some of the men in town. She'd even been accused of being a husband's secret lover once. Patty had berated the woman so loudly, it had left her ears ringing.

"Jealousy is a common trait around here. After all, you've had quite the adventurous life compared to…"

Her friend's voice fell away as Molly began to focus on movement outside the diner. A van was parked across the street, lettering an advertisement for 'Hawkins Power and Light.' She knew where they

came from, but did not see them very often, and thought little of it at times. The laboratory really did function as an extension of the Department of Energy; the best fronts were always fully functional.

What made her heart skip a beat was the man she witnessed exiting the passenger's side. His hair had lost all of its blonde hue, having turned completely white, and his face was older, harsher, but Molly would know him anywhere.

Doctor Martin Brenner.

Molly took a breath, and felt her hands begin to shake.

She thought he was gone.

Why wasn't he gone?

"Molly, are you alright?" she heard Patty ask, her voice somehow breaking through the panic. "You've gone white as a sheet."

"I…I need to go, Patty," she replied, standing rapidly and bumping the table, spilling droplets of coffee and syrup on the surface. She dug the ten Benny had given her out of her purse and tossed it down. "I'll see you next weekend, okay?"

"Well only if you're sure."

Molly didn't wait to see if she said anything else, pushing though the crowded aisle and slamming the front door of the diner open.

She couldn't help but look across the street again, her eyes locking with the man himself.

For one moment, she was alone again, in a dark and terrible place, with only him as her ally, a position he had put himself in to gain her trust and to utterly ruin her.

For one moment, she was One again.

Then Brenner lifted his hand and waved at her, feeling obligated to under her scrutiny. "Good morning!"

He didn't recognize her.

His face had haunted her for years, and he didn't even recognize her.

Barely relieved, Molly managed a quiet 'morning' in response before turning away to her truck. It took every ounce of strength in her body to not speed out of the area, but as soon as she had cleared the town, she barreled down the open roads, her vision tunneling as she fought to get back to the one place she felt safe.

He was supposed to be gone. She had seen the articles. Project MKUltra had been exposed, people had come forward claiming abuse, why would he still be there? She thought home was safe because she thought he was gone.

Why had she assumed?

When she turned into her driveway, Molly braked hard, killing the engine and practically ripping her gun out of its resting place. She skipped the perimeter check, heading straight into the house. She cleared this room and that one, but it wasn't good enough, the pounding in her ears would not cease, the fear would not leave, so she resorted to the one thing she thought to never do again.

Molly had two voices: her normal voice, and the one that made people obey. How she switched up between the two to keep people from constantly being subjected to her will was difficult to explain. It was like there was something inside of her, a power she tapped into, a calm lake in the middle of chaos. And when she did that, anything she said, people would do.

She tapped into that place now.

"If you are in this house, come here!"

For a moment, everything was silent, then O'Malley padded into the entryway from the kitchen, meowing.

She almost laughed. It sounded like a sob.

Molly put the gun down on the small desk beside her, bending over to pick up the cat. "I'm sorry, O'Malley. I didn't mean to do that to

you."

No one was here, she told herself. No one was coming here. Brenner hadn't recognized her and she was still safe.

No one was going to take her again.

October, 1955
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Doctor Martin Brenner looked through the two-way mirror, watching a small girl struggle against the chair she was tied to. Her face was red and her eyes were watering. They had gagged her as well.

She was all of six years old, according to the report.

Six years old, and people were utterly terrified of her.

"What can you tell me?" he asked his colleague to his left, Doctor Samson.

The balding man opened up a file, adjusting his glasses. "Local orphanage claims she was abandoned by her parents. They saw a black car driving away, but couldn't make out much more than that. They tried to calm her down, but she kept screaming at them. At first, it was just nonsense, until she told one of the caretakers to leave her alone. Woman says she left the room and couldn't stop herself. Then it's just various reports of her telling them to do things, and them feeling compelled to do them. They had to wait until she fell asleep, then they gagged the girl and brought her here."

The police department, as if they were equipped to handle something such as this. The situation required a delicate touch, and these men were anything but.

"And what do you think?"

Samson sighed, removing his glasses. "I think that when James tried to remove the gag, she told him to leave, and he left not only the room, but the building too. We had to restrain the man to keep him from going further."

Brenner brought a hand to his chin, thinking.

This could be it, he thought. The answer they had been seeking; the key to defeating the Russians.

"Doctor Brenner?"

"Bring her back to Hawkins," he replied, stepping away from the window. "We have work to do."

Thanks for reading!

3. Hopper

A/N: An the inspiration just keeps coming. Thank you so much for the reviews, follows, and faves! You guys are overwhelming me with the love and I appreciate it!

Chapter Three
Hopper

June 30, 1969

Life had not ceased being strange after One came into Charlie's life. Of course, she wasn't called that anymore. She'd taken her own name – Molly – and had added his last name to it. He wasn't ashamed to say he'd cried at that.

It wasn't difficult to convince the town that he had a daughter. After all, he wasn't from Hawkins originally, and was a fairly private person. Who would question that he had a failed marriage from before he moved to town? No, the difficulty was in trying to explain why she acted so weird.

Turns out, being a part of government experimentation severely cripples a person's ability to interact with society, not to mention her education was incredibly lacking for a girl her age. The latter, at least, was partially solved by Molly herself.

The girl loved to read, and she loved to hear herself read. She started with simple children's books and worked her way through the levels until one night he caught her on the roof of the house reading Tolstoy out loud. He figured she was doing alright for herself. She was at the library so often, they'd actually given her a key to lock up at night.

Interacting with people was another matter entirely.

Once they'd established that using her powers on a whim was not how she should go through life – which was a whole set of traumas on its own – Molly had been possessed by a constricting fear of society. It was paranoia in two parts: that they all somehow knew or

that they would all somehow find out.

Charlie had considered relocating her. The damned laboratory was only a few miles away and even though he had seen no sign of them – something he blamed on her strange abilities – the fact remained that they were still around and undoubtedly searching for her. But he hadn't had the resources. He'd invested quite a bit of money into the farm, and to change towns might have left him destitute.

But Molly had understood and told him she would be fine, and for whatever reason, that broke his heart.

School was difficult for Molly. She was the quiet type with her nose always in a book. The kids didn't take to her. They teased her short hair, that only became more awkward looking as it grew back out, and they were quick to jump on mistakes she made. Book smart she may have been, but Molly didn't know the first thing about slang or pop culture, and he sure as hell didn't know how fashion worked. She usually went to school dressed like one of his farmhands.

One of the teachers had at least taken pity on his poor soul and not only brought some hand-me-downs from her daughters, but also helped Molly with certain, sensitive female topics.

Since school hadn't quite worked out as well as he had hoped, Charlie decided to involve Molly in more of his activities. He took her fishing and hunting with a few buddies of his every now and again. Away from judgment, the girl had really opened up, and was soon cracking jokes and bagging bucks with the rest of them.

That confidence had carried back into school, but instead of becoming popular with the girls, she'd become the center of attention for many of the boys, which made Charlie regret his role in it all when he took to sitting on the front porch with a shotgun in his lap every night.

Somehow, the strangeness became routine, and then the new normal for him.

And life carried on.

Now, despite having a girl who could make anyone obey her commands on a whim and who was still technically on the run from her government staying in his house, Charlie found the man sitting across from him to be the strange thing that particular morning.

He'd heard the name James Hopper before – and was fairly certain he had chased him off his property at some point in the past – but finding the young man at his door earlier was certainly not on the list of things he'd expected that day. Still, he had invited him inside, because his mother had raised him to be a proper gentleman, and now they sat at his kitchen table, staring at one another over coffee.

Upstairs, *Hey Jude* kept playing over and over.

"You just came back from Nam?" Charlie asked, tapping the ashes from his cigarette. He'd offered the kid a light, which he had accepted, taking a long, hard drag.

"Yes, sir," Hopper replied, leveling a hard gaze on him. Soldiers recognized soldiers, and Charlie could see from the look in his eyes that not only had he been over there, he'd seen some shit too. "Just finished my second tour. Don't see myself doing a third."

Charlie nodded. "So, aside from lifting my cigarettes, what brings you here, kid? In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not the dinner hosting type."

Hopper fell silent, thinking. He watched the boy's eyes glance around the space. It was certainly cleaner now than it had been in the past, a clear, feminine touch on the place. Not overly so, of course. There weren't floral things covering every corner of his house, but Molly insisted he possess more towels than he needed for whatever reason.

"I guess…I was looking for advice."

Charlie chuckled. "Boy, then you really came to the wrong place."

"Look, you were in the war, right?" Hopper asked, frustrated. "Roy Decker is always going on about some story of yours. Now, I know he's full of shit, but he has to get it from somewhere. You've seen things and you've done things and…"

His voice trailed off, thought process lost, or maybe he was just unwilling to admit what had happened quite yet.

"I guess I just don't know what to do."

With a sigh, Charlie put his cigarette out in the ash tray and folded his hands. "You gotta keep busy, kid. No matter what, you have to occupy yourself. If busy for you means reading fifty books a week, then you do it, and if it means you get the hell out of town, pack tonight and go. You can't get stuck."

Hopper watched him for a long time and then nodded slowly. He wasn't sure if that was what the kid wanted to hear, but it was all he had for him. Charlie had come from St. Louis, and found that he couldn't stand the noise. Quiet had come to mean safety to him, and so he had sought it out, and that was how he found himself in Hawkins.

The moment was interrupted by a record scratch and the sound of feet running down the stairs.

"Gertrude's gotten out of the pen again," Molly called out, scrambling to the front door and tugging on her boots. Despite her fashion upgrade in recent years, she still fell back on pants and plaid shirts when at home. "Storm's coming in. One clap of thunder and she'll be halfway to Cartersville before-oh."

Molly was still bent over her boot, staring at them from between strands of her red hair. It had grown a couple feet since he'd found her. She wasn't a fan of getting it cut, shockingly.

"I didn't know we had company."

"Course you didn't. That damn record player of yours is set to shake the house down," Charlie replied, though there was a smile on his face.

Molly smiled, standing and tucking the hair behind her ear. "How else is Mrs. Gillespie supposed to know I'm back in town with my 'devil's music?'"

"Mrs. Gillespie lives four miles away."

"And yet, I feel she can hear it anyway."

Charlie chuckled. He wasn't a fan of The Beatles or any of the new hippie music, but he wasn't about to complain either. When he was young, he'd stormed Utah Beach. Weird music was hardly the thing to get into a fit over.

Molly was eyeing him, and he realized she was waiting for an introduction.

"Uh, James, this is my daughter, Molly. Molly, this is James Hopper."

The boy stood quickly out of the chair, shaking his daughter's hand a little too enthusiastically.

"Jim," he said, releasing her hand quickly as he caught Charlie's gaze. "Everyone calls me Jim."

Molly crossed her arms. "Same Jim Hopper who started a small fire in the gymnasium during homecoming?"

His face scrunched together. "They still talk about that?"

"It's a small town. We need to occupy ourselves somehow."

Charlie stood, suddenly realizing he was a few inches shorter than the boy. "Molly is on break from Ohio State. She comes home to help her old man take care of the farm."

"Not that he actually needs the help," Molly replied. "What about you?"

"He just came back from Vietnam."

Charlie could see the mood change immediately. Hopper suddenly seemed very uncomfortable, and he couldn't blame the boy. People didn't tend to react well to the news. But that wasn't Molly's style, and he knew telling the truth wouldn't be an issue.

"Drafted?" she asked. Charlie elbowed her lightly. Sometimes the curiosity still overwhelmed her sense of decorum.

"Volunteered, actually," Hopper replied, leveling a look on her. He was waiting to see if that would suddenly change her opinion of him.

A crack of thunder overhead interrupted the moment.

"Oh shit!" Molly shouted, running back to the door and grabbing the raincoat hanging on the coat rack. "I gotta go! Welcome back, Jim! C'mon, Mac!"

The hound, still no less large but definitely slower, trotted after her and the door slammed shut.

Both of them stared after her.

Charlie turned to Hopper, jabbing him in the shoulder with two fingers. "Don't get any ideas."

1983

Being chief of police meant that you didn't technically get any days off. However, there was an understanding that on certain days, no one was to disturb him unless the damn town was on fire, and even then, maybe wait half an hour just in case. He'd had no intention of being conscious during morning hours that Sunday – never mind that he'd gone to sleep when it *was* morning – so when he heard his phone ringing and the clock read somewhere in the ten o'clock region, he was already in a piss poor mood.

He ignored it the first time, sighing in comfort when the trailer fell silent. It didn't last long as the phone began to ring again.

Swearing under his breath, Hopper blindly reached in the direction of his phone, hand flopping against the table over and over. He stretched too far, losing his precarious balance and falling onto the floor with the phone.

He'd fallen asleep on the couch again.

Never mind that he should have realized that already. He didn't have a phone in his room after all.

Hopper finally grabbed the hand-piece. "Someone better be dead."

"There's a healthy mindset for a police officer," Flo droned from the other end.

"Flo, I'm ten seconds away from yanking the cord out."

"Patty called me. She was having her weekly breakfast with Molly when the girl practically bolted out of the diner. Said she looked pretty shaken and is concerned about her," Flo continued as Hopper sat up on the floor. "She thought that given your, and I quote, 'obvious flirtatious relationship' with Molly, you'd be concerned enough to check up on her."

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose. "You sure she's not trying to set something up?"

Flo sighed. "Bearing in mind that this is my day off too and that I am not here as your personal date orchestrator, I wouldn't call unless I thought it was serious."

"Alright, alright. I'll go check it out."

He hung up the phone and flopped back on the floor.

Nearly an hour later, Hopper had made himself as presentable as possible and was slowly making his way down County Road 16. He'd thought about just calling at first – Flo may have been convinced something was up, but Patty had been known to over-exaggerate everything she encountered – but realized that he neither had her phone number nor a phone book to look it up.

He hadn't actually been to her place since Charlie's funeral. Despite that fact, he expected the old man to be sitting on the porch cleaning his shotgun, eyeing him like that day they first met. If he didn't want him anywhere near Molly then, Hopper could only imagine what the man would think of him now.

Might just be enough to raise him from the dead actually.

Hopper pulled into the gravel driveway, parking behind Molly's

truck. He didn't miss how the vehicle was slightly askew, with deep tread marks in the gravel. She had braked quickly and hadn't bothered correcting it.

His chest tightened slightly.

Alright, maybe Patty was on to something.

Approaching the door, Hopper knocked on it lightly, listening to the sound of shuffling feet inside.

"Molly? It's Jim," he said, feeling awkward as he stood in front of the door. The welcome mat beneath his feet had a face that smiled at him, her obvious touch. "Look, I guess you gave Patty a fright earlier and she wanted someone to make sure that you were-"

When she opened the house door, Hopper was instantly on alert. Wide-eyed and pale, Molly looked genuinely terrified. His first reaction was to reach for his holster, but given it was a Sunday, he'd left the house in his civilian clothes and hadn't bothered bringing his piece. Instead, he slapped his hip uselessly before grabbing the screen door and throwing it open.

"Hey, what's going on? Are you alright?" he asked, clasping his hands on her shoulders before he could stop himself. He glanced around the entryway, looking for any sign of something that shouldn't be.

"I'm fine, Jim," Molly replied, attempting to shrug out of his grasp. She grabbed his wrists and pulled lightly on them. "Really, I am. It's nothing."

"Molly, you're shaking."

"I'm cold."

Hopper thought to call her on her bullshit – it was pushing eighty outside – but decided to leave it. He wasn't in the mood to be on the losing side of an argument. So, he released Molly and waited for her to tell him to leave, but she didn't. Instead, she turned to the kitchen, and he took it as an invitation to follow. Maybe it was her way of admitting that she felt more comfortable with him there, and he took that as a small but significant win.

He couldn't help but whistle as he spied the dismantled rifle on the kitchen table. Molly walked past like there was nothing to it, grabbing a mug from one of her cupboards.

"Nothing, huh?"

"I heard a couple coyotes the other day," Molly replied, pouring coffee. "Figured I should be prepared."

"With Charlie's old war rifle?" Hopper asked, leaning against the doorway. He knew the type: an old M1. Trained with it before he shipped out to Vietnam, but when he got in country, they'd handed him the M16, automatic, thirty rounds instead of eight. It was quite the shift.

The rifle wasn't exactly light either. He couldn't imagine Molly lugging the thing around her property, much less picking off coyotes with it.

"I can't take them out with a peashooter."

"Don't need a cannon either."

Molly shrugged, walking back over and handing him the mug. "Drink up. You look like hell."

He made a face. "Appreciate the honesty, Miss Davis."

While he drank – the coffee was black, just how he liked it – Molly began to grab the rifle components from the table. Hopper watched with growing disbelief as she quickly and efficiently put the rifle back together, complete with safety and action checks. She was a professional, clearly put through the paces by Charlie at some point in her life.

It was impressive.

And, admittedly, sexy.

Hopper drank the coffee a little faster.

Despite Charlie's warning when he first met her, Hopper had been

intrigued by Molly, and when he'd driven away from the farm only to see the girl walking along the road with a plow horse in tow, soaked to the bone and laughing all the while, he had pulled over for a little more small talk. He was a young man, after all, and the more discouragement he was given, the more interested he was.

So, they talked. He flirted and she responded in kind. But then she'd asked him a question he wasn't ready for.

Why would you volunteer to go to war?

She hadn't meant any offense, and had prefaced it with an insistence that he did not need to answer if he did not want to, but the words had still caught him off guard, mostly because he didn't know. When he signed up, he thought he knew, but over the course of the war, the answer had been lost to him, along with other things. Too many things.

When he had been slow to answer, she had apologized profusely, but he insisted it was fine. Still, the mood had been soured, and he drove away.

Then he met Diane, and the rest had been history.

He never regretted anything with Diane – to a certain point – but sometimes, late at night when he'd been drinking too much, his mind liked to wander. What would have happened if he didn't drive away?

Snapping from his reverie, Hopper moved to put the empty mug in the sink, spying the study across the hallway. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled to the brim. There were stacks of books in boxes too. He recalled several discarded books lying around the house as well.

Molly Davis: English teacher, bookworm, and firearms expert.

Jesus, he knew how to pick them.

"Looking for a new place?" Molly asked from behind him. She'd stashed the rifle somewhere and was leaning against the counter, nursing her own cup of coffee. "I imagine that trailer of yours is homey, but a little cramped."

Hopper paused, completely unsure as to where this conversation was headed.

"Think you ought to buy me dinner first, Molly," he said as casually as he could manage, always leaning back on his ill-timed humor when he had nothing else to go for.

"Cute, but not what I meant," she replied, setting her mug down on the counter. She stared at the surface a while, tapping her fingers on the wood, thinking. "I'm moving, Jim."

It took a second for him to process.

"What?"

He'd snapped it without meaning to, but Molly didn't look surprised by the outburst. She only shrugged.

"This was never meant to be permanent."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

"It's *complicated*?" Hopper echoed, bouncing off the cabinet to stand across from her. "An hour ago, Patty's raving about how she thinks something is wrong with you and now you're telling me that you're moving. I need something better than it's complicated."

Molly crossed her arms, standing her ground. "And I don't *need* to give you anything, Jim."

"Yeah, you never do," he countered, feeling the anger building. It was just so easy to yell; it was harder to do anything else, including listening to that voice in his head saying he was going for a line he shouldn't cross. "Molly Davis, the damn town mystery."

She almost laughed; her smile exasperated. "You know, just because you flirt with me and decided that I'm not going to be one of your latest hit and run victims does not entitle you to my life story."

He felt that.

God did he feel that.

"And you know what, I get it, I really do, and it's fine," she continued, sliding away from the counter, and him. "It's easier for you, and probably me in the long run, but please don't act like this is more than what it looks like when you don't plan on making it that way. Don't do that to me, Jim."

Hopper didn't know what to say. He just stood there processing. How'd this damn trip go from him being concerned about her welfare to her yelling at him over…whatever it was they were?

Not that they were anything.

But they could have been. That was what she kept telling him, but he wasn't willing to hurt her. Unfortunately, he wasn't willing to change the way he was either. And for some reason, he got it in his head that she'd still be there, available, ready to take him in whenever he got around to caring enough.

He always had been an asshole.

A soft tinkling sound announced the arrival of her cat. The orange tabby proceeded to meow until Molly bent over and picked the furball up.

When she stood again, Hopper noticed a silver chain had fallen out from inside her shirt.

He felt his hands ball into fists.

"You're right, I don't need to know anything about you," Hopper admitted, storming to the front door. He pulled it open, hard, and could hear the frame shake from the effort. "But given you seem to know *my* life story, I thought you could at least humor me. Maybe neither of us is worth the effort."

He didn't bother waiting for her reaction; he didn't want to know her response.

Hopper couldn't go to the bar. He didn't want to see anyone that evening, Benny in particular; he didn't want another speech about

how he was an idiot.

So, Hopper did what he did best: got drunk in his trailer and passed out some time before the sun came up.

It still didn't erase the image of the engagement ring hanging around Molly's neck.

So, this is the last "set up" chapter. Next chapter, we find ourselves in the first episode of season one. And no, this isn't the last we see of Charlie. Plenty of more specifics to come!

Thanks for reading!

4. The Disappearance

A/N: Hello one and all! I am back with another chapter! Thank you once again for your reviews, follows, and favorites. I appreciate it all so much!

Chapter Four
The Disappearance

October 18, 1974

Over the past few years, Molly had come to expect little gifts waiting for her every now and again. Sometimes there were flowers, once in a while a piece of jewelry – although a very important lesson was learned about her forgetfulness when it came to wearing such things – mostly, though, she received books. They were a variety of titles from an endless list of genres, but Molly appreciated every one of them, and always made sure to read them first.

Even the Westerns.

Especially the Westerns.

He wouldn't admit it, but they were his favorite.

So, when she arrived at work that Saturday – the public school system only gave her two classes at the time so she worked at the library on weekends – Molly was not surprised to find a single book lying on the desk with a neatly written note on top. Once, he had placed it without one, and leaving a discarded book in the library was about as advisable as leaving unattended food outside. It took them two months of combing through the library and was only found when someone attempted to check the book out.

She ran her hand over the cover, sliding into the chair behind the desk and slipping the purse off her shoulder. The book was fairly thick, perhaps four hundred pages or a little more, with a simple, black cover, the sleeve having already been removed – she hated book sleeves.

Picking up the little notecard on top, Molly began to read the message.

It's been a while since I could surprise you with one of these, but I think I've outdone myself this time.

Molly smirked, flipping the card over.

Stop checking this side, Bookworm. I'm not that longwinded.

She began to laugh, covering her mouth quickly with her hand as she glanced around the library. Despite being just past ten, the building was bustling, but only a young boy seemed to notice her outburst, watching her for a few moments before his attention was attracted to something else.

Eudora, her fellow librarian, an older woman without an ounce of humor in her, was strangely absent. Snapping at people to be quiet as they first entered the building tended to be what she enjoyed the most – if someone like her could find enjoyment – but her thick-rimmed glasses and beehive hair were nowhere to be found.

It was probably for the best. She sneered at anything that wasn't relatively related to disdain.

Placing the card down, Molly opened the cover, hoping to catch a glimpse at the first few pages of the latest literary adventure he'd gotten her into. Instead of words, however, she found herself staring at a small box. The pages of the book had been precisely cut, allowing the velvet container to nestle comfortably inside.

Carefully, Molly tipped the book over, dropping the box into her hand. She held it there a moment, feeling her heart begin to pound against her chest, before gathering the courage to open the case.

A gold band with a single – and fairly large – diamond greeted her.

Molly covered her mouth, smothering the gasp as she continued to stare at the little trinket.

"There it is: one look of utter astonishment. I told you I outdid myself."

She looked up to the smiling face of Frederick Hartman, her boyfriend for the last three years.

Relationships had been a difficult thing for Molly. Besides the fact that she barely knew how to interact with people normally much less in a romantic fashion, she also had the presence of Charlie to combat with. She didn't know how to act like a girl should and he didn't know how to give her advice. What he *did* know was how to threaten a boy in ten different ways before he even opened his mouth.

When she'd finally gathered the courage to go to a university, Molly found her life experience drastically changed. Her curious nature was blamed on her small town roots, and the big city girls quickly took her under their wing and brushed her up on the ways of the world, meaning they taught her how to do her make up, her hair, and, most importantly, how to deal with the opposite sex.

Still, she had been awkward, and after a few failed flings, had decided that maybe relationships weren't quite meant for someone who'd had the sort of life she did.

Until the senior who wasn't paying attention on the university lawn nearly tackled her. That didn't stop her pile of books from falling into the dirt, prompting his pet name for her.

And now she was holding the ring that he meant to propose with.

His green eyes crinkled at the edges. "Care to say anything?"

Molly blinked, looking at the box, then back to him. "You cut a hole in a book."

Fred began to laugh, leaning forward and swiping the book from her desk. "See, I knew you would say that, so I made sure it was an old chemistry book of mine. It's full of outdated information. Completely useless, I promise."

He slapped the book closed and tossed it behind him, ignoring the aggravated stares. Continuing with his act of library misconduct, Fred gripped her desk and proceeded to leap over it, landing on the other side beside her, his brown curls bouncing from the effort. It was

rather impressive given he was in a three-piece suit, but Molly nearly jumped out of her chair in surprise, looking around at all the witnesses.

"Christ, Fred, you could have walked around."

"Takes too long," he replied, getting down on one knee in front of her. "So, Molly Davis, will you accept a lifetime of public embarrassment and be my wife?"

November 4, 1983

The school day had ended maybe ten minutes prior, and already the halls had fallen mostly silent. It was a Friday after all, and most kids had somewhere to be, the arcade maybe or the new roller rink that had opened in the next town over. Anywhere but school.

Molly sat at her desk, reading over some of her recent mail. There were job offers from several cities, to include some in the Chicago area, which she had been leaning toward. Somewhere less quiet with more faces, a good place to disappear.

Initially, she had wanted to leave at the end of the semester, take the time over winter break to move, but the principal had all but begged her. They didn't have anyone lined up and two teachers were already retiring, so she relented and agreed to wait until summer.

She had, however, essentially become a shut in. If she wasn't at school, she was at home, packing and pretending she hadn't become overly paranoid. She still saw Patty on Sundays – although just barely given her head was always on a swivel – but otherwise there was no other social activity on her part. She hadn't been to the bar in weeks and there had been no sign of a Chevy Blazer on her road in the same amount of time.

Leaning back, Molly grabbed at the chain around her neck and began to toy with the ring. It used to be a constant nervous tic of hers, but lately she had been wearing it more out of routine than anything else. She hadn't expected Hopper to see it, and certainly never thought it would be a problem.

Then again, she hadn't thought she'd unload on him like that either.

Molly sighed. They were both being children. One would think two grown adults could sit down and discuss things normally. But she *had* sprung moving on him – and on herself really – and in the end, he had a point. How much *did* Hopper know about her? Or anyone for that matter?

Charlie had been her only true outlet, the one who had known every aspect of her life. Not even Fred had known the one terrible truth behind everything that she was. And how could she have told him? She trusted him with her life, but there are some truths that people cannot, and are not meant, to handle, not to mention it would only put him in danger as well, but maybe that had always been the case.

No, even the obvious aside, Molly knew she had been reluctant to release any details about her life. She barely spoke about Cincinnati, college, anything post-high school really, as if she could just pass back into town and pretend it was the sixties again.

Hopper was right. She *was* the damn town mystery.

She sighed again, tucking the necklace back into her shirt; she needed Charlie back.

"Miss Davis?"

Molly glanced at the door, spying that all too familiar bowl cut, and smiled.

"Come on in, Will," she said, gesturing to the chair beside her desk. "I was just finishing up."

The boy smiled, pulling the chair close and taking a seat. He whipped his backpack off and began to rifle through the contents within while Molly cleared the paperwork form her desk. She hadn't the heart to tell any of her students yet. It was still early in the year, after all. There were enough broken hearts to go around already.

Retrieving the correct notebook, Will slapped it on the desk. It was already open, the pages littered with small sketches on the sides of the page. Not the typical stick art she had seen, but detailed

depictions of creatures, no matter how small he drew them. His mind was always at work with hands that needed constant occupation. She knew the type.

"The big campaign is this weekend, right?"

"Yeah," he admitted, sounding far less enthusiastic than she thought he would.

"Try not to sound so excited there, Will."

He perked up slightly. "Oh, I am! I mean, I don't think I'll be able to sleep. It's just…I guess I'm nervous."

Molly leaned forward, resting her head on her hand. "What do you have to be nervous about? I thought you defeated a black dragon last campaign."

Will shrugged. "Yeah we did, kinda. He didn't die; he just retreated. But Dustin thinks we're going to fight the Demogorgon this time, and we just don't have the firepower for that kind of evil."

"And what is the Demogorgon exactly?"

"He comes from the Abyss, and he calls himself the Prince of Demons."

Molly lifted her eyebrows. "You're right, that does sound intimidating. I mean, dragons are one thing, but demons tend to not follow the basic rules of reality."

"Exactly!" Will shouted, throwing his arms up.

"However," she continued, lifting a finger before he could continue his panicked tirade. "I hear wizards are the same way. Gandalf defeated a balrog after all."

Will frowned. "But Gandalf died."

"And the Valar brought him back."

"I don't think anyone in the party has that kind of restoration stats."

Molly smiled and shook her head. "Look, Will, I'm not going to tell you it's just a game, because I know it's not. However, life is full of risk-taking and perils. Maybe you're not about to encounter a demon prince down the street, but even so, you can't spend your days worrying about it. Take a cue from your characters and enjoy the adventure you're on."

The boy thought about it a moment, then smiled and nodded.

"Now, I presume you're here to get a head start on a campaign that is going to blow Mike's out of the water, yes?"

Will nodded again.

"Alright, show me what you've got."

Molly watched Will flip to the appropriate page in his notebook and spent the next hour listening to and adjusting his campaign idea, to include building an intense chase sequence that was inevitably only created to toss Dustin's dwarf into a hole.

Because these boys may have been creative, but they were still boys.

November 6

The farmhouse didn't have a fireplace, but there was an old wood-burning stove in the corner of the living room. On dark, cooler evenings, Molly liked to stoke a fire and curl up in her reading chair. There was something about reading by firelight that was both incredibly comforting and profoundly cliché. However, she had always been a fan of cliché, and took no issue with how silly it might have looked.

Besides, who was going to see her? Her nearest neighbor was nearly a mile away.

O'Malley was curled up in her lap, purring contentedly as she stroked him with one hand while the other held her book. She'd mastered the art of turning the pages one-handed ages ago, a necessary survival tactic with a cat who would not allow you to stop petting him until he personally gave you leave to.

She supposed the one good thing about the current lack of a social life was that she got to read more.

Not that she had stopped, but given her history, it *felt* like she never read.

Going for the complete aesthetic, Molly had shut the other lights off in the house, leaving herself bathed in the soft glow of the fire. However, there was still a faint light coming through her front window from the street lamp at the end of her driveway. It used to bother her, how the light could still leak through her shades no matter how tightly they were pulled, but like most things, she had grown used to the sensation.

So, when the light suddenly snapped out, Molly noticed.

Stretching as far as she could so as not to disturb her cat, Molly's fingers just grazed the shades enough to move them and give her a quick view of the outside. Her eyes were greeted by an inky darkness where a lit road used to be. She waited a few moments, wondering if it was just a brief surge, but the light did not flicker back to life.

Sighing, Molly stood from the chair, much to O'Malley's chagrin. The tabby gave her an earful as she set her book down on the table beside her chair and stumbled to the light switch. When the soft 'click' was met with further darkness, she felt her stomach sink.

Molly dropped to floor, crawling back toward the chair. Her book wasn't the only thing resting on the table, but her pistol as well. Her hands grasped the cool metal, quickly flicking the safety off as she moved back to the window.

Glancing outside again, she couldn't make out any movement, only a continued darkness as the lights refused to turn back on.

Slowly, she made her way to the kitchen, hoping to put a wall between her and the front entrance. She leaned against it and chambered a round in her pistol.

Then she waited.

The seconds ticked by, and the house remained silent. She heard no

footsteps, no creaking from the wood panels on her porch. Just the soft tapping of the tree outside as the wind blew it into the windows.

But still, Molly refused to move. It could have been nothing, but it could also be something, and she wasn't about to risk her safety either way. Maybe they still didn't know she was here; maybe Brenner never considered the possibility that she wasn't living right under their noses, but there was always a chance that-

Molly jumped as the phone rang, releasing a slew of curses under her breath. She listened to it go off a few more times, tapping the side of her pistol, before reaching up and pulling the cord. With practiced ease, she grabbed the hand-piece before it crashed to the floor and brought it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Oh Molly, thank God!" shouted Patty's voice from the other end. "I tried calling Flo but she wasn't answering, and then I tried Rebecca down the street, but the same thing there, and I thought to myself, well, surely the whole town hasn't up and disappeared. Where could everyone be on a Sunday evening?"

Molly tried to smile, but it faded quickly. "Well, here I am. Same place as always."

"Are you alright? You sound exhausted, dear. You know, ever since that day in the diner, you haven't been quite the-"

"I'm fine, Patty," Molly interrupted, certain that only cemented the fact that she was anything but. "The phone just scared me. That's all."

"…were you reading with the lights off again?"

"I should have never told you about that."

"Well, you know me, I was bound to find out one of these days," Patty continued, completely forgetting her concern. "Frankly, I'm jealous. I could use a fireplace myself. It looks like the whole transformer blew out here. I don't know when I'll get power back. It's a good thing I already let the dog out. Can't imagine trying to find him without the back porch light. Can you believe that-"

She let her friend drone on. When unexpected things happened, Patty liked to talk nonsensically and without pause. It was to calm her nerves, and listening usually helped Molly. If Patty's power was out, that means a good portion of Hawkins was sitting in the dark at that moment. No one was looking for her. She was still safe.

When the conversation was finally over – at Molly's insistence because Patty did not have any brakes – she stood slowly and placed the phone back on the receiver. She took a long, deep breath, and began to wonder how she could make it through the next seven months without losing her mind.

Molly began to fumble with one of the kitchen cabinets until she found an old flashlight. She flicked it on and grabbed her coat. Ever prepared, Charlie kept a generator in the backyard in case of emergencies, and frankly, Molly was ready to sleep with the lights on that night.

When she opened the back door and stepped out onto the porch, loud hissing began to emanate from the house.

Turning back inside, Molly pointed her flashlight in the direction of the sound. She found her tabby curled up in a corner, glaring in the direction of the outdoors.

"What is it, O'Malley?"

Her cat only continued to hiss before bounding further into the house.

Molly returned to the kitchen and grabbed the pistol again.

It was still quiet outside as Molly trekked through the grass to the generator; the first frost had come in a couple days before and killed off most of the insects. She almost wished it hadn't. What she wouldn't give for a couple crickets to chirp and make the night feel somewhat normal again.

Cloud cover plus the power outage made the night nearly pitch black, and Molly could hardly see anything outside the bright beam of light from her flashlight. She kept her grip on the pistol tight and at the

ready. The last thing she needed was an actual coyote wandering up on her as she was fumbling with the generator.

Following the cord that extended from the house, Molly finally came across the old machine – funny how things always seemed further away in the dark – and grabbed the pull cord. She tugged on it once, but to no avail. Twice, there was still nothing. The third time it sputtered and revved to life.

Eventually, the back porch light flickered on, bathing the backyard in its glow.

It revealed a dead deer lying not five feet away, its back legs completely gone.

November 7

"In half?"

The school's secretary, Margaret, was looking at her like she had gone off the deep end. Although given how spectacular Molly looked that morning, she supposed it wasn't entirely uncalled for. She'd ran back inside, found her cat, and barricaded herself inside her room until sunrise. Maybe once or twice she had fallen asleep – curled in the corner by the door – but for the most part, she had been awake, nerves frayed beyond repair.

When she'd glanced outside again, the deer's body was gone, a victim of scavengers or maybe whatever had attacked it in the first place.

"Are you sure about that?" Margaret continued, blinking at her through her wide-rimmed glasses.

Molly ran a hand through her hair, drinking stale coffee from a Styrofoam cup. They always brewed a fresh pot when the school opened in the morning, but that was nearly two hours ago. Somehow she had made it through her first class. Of course, it was a Monday, so most people in the building were out of it in one way or another.

In fact, she was fairly certain one of the gym teachers was hung-over.

"You're right, Marge, maybe I'm making it all up," Molly replied, leaning against the front office desk. "I'm sure his hind legs were just hiding somewhere."

"Now, you know that's not what I mean. Everyone just seems a bit frazzled from the power outages last night."

"I went hunting with my father more times than I can count. I've seen enough dead deer that it doesn't even faze me; I've seen what a *car* does to a deer, and this was not that."

The secretary shrugged, turning back to her typewriter. "Well, seems you're in luck. The Chief dropped by not long ago. You could bring it up to him when he's finished."

Molly blinked, glancing outside the windows of the office as if he would somehow just appear in the hallway behind her. "What's Jim doing here?"

Margaret gave her a look, but chose not to say anything about her use of his name.

"I'm not really sure. I was on the phone when he came in, but he and Principal Coleman grabbed three students and brought them into his office, along with one of his officers. Seemed like serious business," Margaret said, pausing. "I wonder if it has to do with Phil's garden gnomes. They've gone missing again."

"Which students?"

"Not the usual suspects, that's for sure," the secretary replied. "One of them was the Wheeler boy, that much I know."

"Mike," Molly emphasized, wondering what on earth the boys had gotten up to. They would have been playing Dungeons and Dragons all weekend. The only thing they would have been guilty of was skipping a meal or two. "So, Dustin, Lucas, and Will are in there too?"

"Not Joyce's boy, no. I did say it was only three."

Molly blinked. "But those four do everything together. Why wouldn't Will be in there?"

The secretary shrugged, not at all bothered by how strange the situation was. Molly was about to tell her precisely how wrong it was when the back office door opened and both Hopper and Officer Callahan stepped out. The former took one look at her and stopped briefly, while Callahan looked awkwardly between the two of them, before he made a beeline for the door.

Turning back to the office, Molly got only a brief glance at the three upset boys before Principal Coleman shut the door again.

She ran out of the front office.

"Jim, wait!" Molly called, jogging behind Hopper. He'd already made it outside and halfway to his vehicle. "What's going on?"

"Official police business. 'Fraid I can't discuss it with you," he replied, in that very snarky tone of his that said he was angry and he wanted you to know it.

Ever the mature adult.

"Like hell you can't," Molly said as he approached his Blazer. "So, what, I upset you a little and now it's all 'I'm the Chief of Police and I have protocol to follow?'"

He turned to her as he opened his door. "Yeah, something like that."

Molly glared at him. She had spent half the evening convinced that someone was coming to get her and the other half scared out of her wits; she hadn't made anything for breakfast and was running on the poorest cup of coffee she had drank in years. She was *not* in the mood to put up with attitude from Jim Hopper of all people.

With a huff, Molly slammed Hopper's door shut, just narrowly missing taking his fingers with it.

"Hey! What are you-"

"Get over yourself, Jim," Molly hissed, pushing on his shoulder with two fingers. "There are three very upset students of mine in the principal's office right now when there should be four, because there are always four, because separating these kids is about as easy getting

you to actually listen for a change. And since that seems to be the case now, maybe, for once, you could stop pretending you are the center of the universe and tell me what the hell happened to Will Byers."

Hopper blinked.

Was it unfair?

Probably.

Did she care?

Not particularly.

Sometimes it took a good verbal slapping to get anywhere with people.

"Joyce came into my office earlier today, said Will hadn't come home last night," Hopper admitted, sounding almost ashamed.

Molly stepped back from Hopper, feeling a tugging at her heart. She had just spoken to him. How could he be missing?

"Listen don't…don't get worked up about it," she heard Hopper say. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his hand lifting up, probably to comfort her, but the hand balled into a fist and returned to his side. "He probably just ran off. I'm sure he'll turn up soon enough."

"No," she said, her voice quiet. "That's not like Will. He wouldn't do that."

Hopper sighed. "Look, he's probably gone to see his dad and-"

"Lonnie?" Molly asked, looking up at Hopper. She knew it was logical to think that, but the man before her definitely knew Joyce's ex, and that he was not exactly father of the year material. "Lonnie's an asshole. Will's more likely to show up at my house than his."

"And has he?"

"What?"

"Will. Is there a chance he could have shown up last night?"

"Wha…no, no. I was up all night; I would have noticed," Molly replied, running a hand through her hair.

"He have something to do with it?"

"Who? Will?"

Hopper gestured to her with his head. "Guy who gave you that ring."

Molly blinked. "Are you serious right now?"

The man simply shrugged. "Seems we both like starting conversations at the wrong time. I figured 'why not?' I've got you here, we're relatively alone, let's have a polite discussion about hiding pertinent information from one another."

She could have just walked away then. Hopper had given her the information that she wanted, but there was something about the way he spoke, about how he looked at her, that made her stay.

He wanted the truth?

Fine, he could have the damn truth.

Molly pulled at the chain and dragged the ring out, holding it for him to properly see. "His name's Fred Hartman. He's a biochemist and far more talented than he has any right to be. Rich as hell too. Dad owns a slew of manufacturing companies across the state of Ohio, Mom came from old money, blue-blooded, white collar, you know the type. I marry him, I'm set for life, my kids are set, my grandkids can probably retire when they're twelve."

"Yeah, so why don't you?"

"Because he's dead, Jim," she spat.

The change was instantaneous. That self-righteous air Hopper had been clinging to deflated, and she could see the regret seep into his

eyes. For whatever reason, he never considered the possibility of that being her answer. Maybe no one ever considers the worst possible scenario. How kind of them.

"I don't hide my engagement ring so I can flirt with drunk cops in the middle of nowhere," she continued, driving her verbal dagger in further. "I do it because it's all I've got left, and I can't stand to be asked about it every other day by nosy housewives who have nothing better to do with their lives."

Hopper ran a hand over his face. "Shit…I…Molly, I'm-"

"Sorry?" she finished, putting the ring back and crossing her arms. "Yeah, everyone always is."

They stood in silence for what felt like ages. She'd said her part, and yet still couldn't bring herself to leave.

That was until the other patrol car pulled up beside them and Callahan stuck his head out the window.

"So, are you two having a lover's quarrel or…"

"What are you still doing here?" Hopper asked, shouting, as he stormed toward the car. "I told you to go back to the precinct and pick up Powell! Get out of here!"

Hopper stood in the wake of Callahan's quick escape, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head. Then he turned and looked back at Molly. He looked on the verge of a more formal apology, resembling the Hopper she knew far more than he had in a while, but she didn't want to hear it right now.

She probably needed it, but just, not now.

"Will didn't run away," Molly said before he could get a word out. "I don't know where he could be or what might have happened, but that sweet boy did not leave of his own accord. Don't let whatever's happening with you get in the way of that."

Now things are going to start getting fun! Thanks for reading! See

you next time!

5. The Search

Well, it certainly has been a while. Sorry about that, everyone! Life is interesting sometimes.

This is a relatively quiet chapter, but things are definitely starting to come together. We'll have more revelations about Molly in the coming chapters, as well as more flashbacks to her time in the lab. Yay!

Enjoy!

Chapter Five
The Search

Saying yes to Flo's call for volunteers was the easiest thing Molly had ever done.

Teaching had been a struggle the rest of the day, and she nearly collapsed in her chair in relief when the final bell rang. But there had been no time to rest. She had grabbed her things and taken off to her house, where she quickly slammed a cup of coffee, dressed in her old hunting jacket, and returned to town in the area Flo had directed her to.

It had been a relief to see that she was not the only person in town to answer the call. A couple dozen people had loitered around a small area outside the forest, awkwardly shuffling around with their flashlights, rescue whistles, and bright, orange vests. Small talk was made with quiet voices, as if the idea of doing so while Will was missing was a crime itself. It certainly felt that way as she spoke with Scott Clarke about the boys. He mentioned getting a new CB radio earlier that day, and how excited they had been. Their voices trailed off as they thought of how Will would have reacted.

That was when Hopper stood on the door of his Blazer and hollered instructions at them. If he had noticed her at the time, he didn't say anything, and it didn't matter. There were more important things at hand.

"Will!" Molly shouted, her voice growing hoarse. She had lost count of the number of times she had called his name. "Will Byers, can you hear us?!"

The sun had already set, another sign that winter was rapidly approaching. Molly could make out her breath in the beams of light that raked across the woods. It was going to be another cold night, the kind that lost kids might not come back from.

Molly pushed that thought firmly to the back of her mind and continued to call Will's name.

As time went by, people began to grow tired. She heard less voices calling out and more quiet conversations starting up. Of course, she had no intention of joining them, far more focused on the task at hand, but she couldn't help but catch a tidbit or two.

When her ears caught the sound of Hopper's distinctly gruff voice mentioning the name of his daughter, alarms began to go off in Molly's head.

As far as she knew, Jim Hopper had never told anyone about what happened to Sara or what had become of his marriage, yet – as small towns tend to do – all of Hawkins appeared aware of every detail. Charlie had actually been the one to tell her, and she suspected at the time that it had been some form of warning against the Chief. Really, it had only endeared him to her more. Where others saw a drunk, uncaring man, Molly saw someone in pain, and she had quickly realized he was one of the few people in town she could identify with.

She never brought it up with him in conversation, but he had made it obvious on more than one occasion that he was aware of her knowledge of the subject. He'd made off-handed comments about what Diane did or did not like about him, though he never used her name. She was just 'his ex-wife.' Made it less personal that way.

There had been a few years where Fred had simply been known as 'her fiancé.' If she disconnected the two long enough, she thought it might hurt less. Looking back, it made little sense, but the world was a different place when you were constantly hurting.

As slowly and subtly as she could, Molly made her way over to the direction she had last seen Hopper.

It wasn't hard to find him – he was the biggest thing around – but she didn't approach him just yet, calling out Will's name a few more times so he was at least aware she was there. If he wanted to talk, he had the opportunity.

A few more minutes passed.

Molly could tell exhaustion was beginning to set in. The trees were starting to move in funny ways. Shadows were dancing on the edge of her vision, and even her calls were growing fewer and further between. But giving up on the search wasn't an option, not to her, not yet.

Leaning against the nearest pine, Molly took a moment to rub her eyes, regretting not bringing a cannister of coffee with her.

"You doing alright?"

His voice was soft, and would have likely scared the living daylights out of her had she not heard his loud footfalls approach.

Molly smiled when she looked up, though she wasn't sure he could see it. "About as well as I can be. I was up all night, after all."

"Yeah…right," Hopper mumbled slowly, remembering how his line of questioning went last time.

Last time. As if that hadn't been only a handful of hours ago.

She began to move forward again, strafing the area with her flashlight, aware of Hopper's presence still behind her.

He wanted to ask, but something was holding him back. The past two months were a little hard to ignore, after all, even if he did have an explanation regarding her ring now. Of course, she could have just told him too, but for some reason, she wanted him to ask.

"Are *you* doing okay?" she blurted after a while, tired of the silence. They'd strayed from the main group a little, the calls quieter. "I mean,

I heard you talking to Scott and…"

Molly knew she didn't need to say the whole thing.

"Now, when am I ever 'doing okay?'" Hopper replied behind her, his self-deprecating humor not quite hitting the mark. "I just…I forget sometimes that she's…"

Seemed neither one of them were capable of finishing their thoughts.

Stopping, Molly turned and looked up at Hopper. "I know. You wake up in the morning and everything's okay. Then you blink and realize that the bed is empty, and so is the rest of the house, and then it's back, that pain you thought you were used to. Turns out, it just needed a better angle."

Hopper nodded. "Yeah."

They walked forward together then, searching and calling a few more minutes. The trees were starting to thin a bit, and the ground was growing rockier. Easy place for someone to twist an ankle, break a leg; easy place to get stuck without help.

"So, why were you up all night, Molly?"

She found herself shrugging despite the fact that he couldn't see the movement. It was funny how she had completely forgotten about the event for most of the day.

"There's something big hanging out around the farm."

"More coyotes?" he asked, in a tone that suggested he hadn't believed her the first time. It hadn't been one of her better lies.

"Bigger," Molly admitted, remembering its prey. "Ripping the hind legs off a deer kind of big."

Hopper stumbled a little. "What? We talking about a bear here?"

"When was the last time you saw a bear? During that fictional trip to Michigan of yours?"

"Well, what else could have done it?"

"I don't know," she replied, just clearing a tree root that stuck up a little too far. "And that's why I was up all night."

"Jesus," Hopper sighed, running his hand over his face.

It was a lot to take in, and in that moment, Molly suddenly realized that Will might be out there at the same time with whatever that thing was. Her pace picked up immediately, and her calls became more frequent.

Maybe half an hour later, there was a low rumble in the distance. The air had smelled like rain for some time, but Molly had hoped that it was the rising fog from the nearby lakes tricking her. Instead, the heavens opened up, dumping water on the search and rescue team without a single warning drop.

Molly stumbled to the largest tree nearby, a thick pine that briefly sheltered her from the storm as she flipped the hood of her jacket up. She heard Hopper run in behind her, a slew of curse words tumbling from his mouth. He leaned over her, attempting to get a look at the environment, and she could feel the water from his hat dripping onto her jacket.

He grabbed his radio. "Powell. Callahan. Call off the search. No way we're finding anything in this."

As a chorus of affirmatives droned through the radio, Molly turned and looked up at Hopper, feeling her heart drop. "We can't just stop looking. Not yet."

"We can barely see a foot in front of us, Molly," Hopper countered, raising his hand to point at the obscured view in question. "The ground here is hard enough to navigate when it's not soaking wet. Getting hurt isn't going to help Will."

"Leaving isn't going to help him either," she replied, crossing her arms and storming into the rain. Her ankles teetered slightly as she made her way over the rocky ground, but her boots kept them safe from harm, crossing over the wet surfaces as if nothing had changed.

"Hey! Get back here!" Hopper shouted behind her, but she ignored him, keeping the image of that deer in the forefront of her mind. Will was out there, somewhere, and so was that thing. "Molly!"

"Will!" she cried, attempting to drown the chief's gruff voice. The rain refused to taper off, piercing slowly through the thick layers of even her jacket, until she felt the cold seep in. "Will!"

Lightning flashed overhead as she reached a small hill, bathing the area in a white glow. In the rain, she heard nothing, but caught the rocks moving in that brief moment of light. An admittedly high-pitched squeak managed to escape her mouth as her arms began to flail for balance. It was a losing battle, and Molly felt herself tipping closer to the earth until a large hand firmly gripped her wrist, all but lifting her up and out of danger.

She felt herself leaning with her back against his chest, before Hopper spun her around, placing his free hand on her shoulder. "*That* is what I was talking about! Look, just because I'm an asshole, doesn't mean I don't care. It's dangerous to keep going."

Molly sighed, wiping her face as if that could relieve her of the rain that continuously pelted it. "I know! I know! It's just…Jim, I have school tomorrow, and in one of those classes there is going to be a very cold and empty desk where Will is supposed to be. I just…I can't stand the idea of being there and pretending everything is alright. So, just, let me look a little longer, okay? You don't have to stay."

Hopper's face was still stern, but she could make out the harder edges softening, his anger easing a bit. His grip loosened.

Say the word, and he'll do just about anything for you.

"There's no way in hell I'm leaving you out here alone," he huffed, walking forward to continue the search.

His hand hadn't let go of her wrist, but Molly said nothing of it, allowing him to tug at it now and again as they shouted Will's name into the storm.

She couldn't say how much time passed. The rain made their progress

slower, and it only made the journey back seem that much more daunting as they continued away from their vehicles. But Molly did not want to give up, and neither did Hopper, she thought. Keeping her safe was an excuse.

Eventually, the trees thinned – as did the rain – and gave way to a large field of soybeans. Molly felt Hopper's grip on her wrist tighten slightly.

"This is it," he sighed.

"What?"

"City limit. We're staring at Cartersville."

Molly glanced around the field, vaguely recognizing the land. Charlie used to get them in trouble for hunting deer on the property.

"Shit!" she hissed, throwing her hood off in frustration. Unable to quite let go yet, her eyes continued to peer into the darkness, searching for any sign of the wayward boy. "Will!"

Her last shout echoed, and was met with the same dismal silence that had followed them all evening.

They needed to go now, she realized that, yet Molly couldn't bring herself to move. She needed to wait, just a little longer, just to say she had.

Just to give her heart a moment to remember how to deal with this ache again.

Molly felt Hopper's grip slip off her wrist, his hand moving to hold hers, tightly enveloping her small fingers and bringing some feeling back into them.

She laced her fingers with his and squeezed as hard as she could.

He didn't seem to mind.

By the time they arrived back at the starting point of the search, it

was well past midnight. Hopper was more or less pulling Molly along as she stumbled half-awake through the trees, her adrenaline rush from searching for Will long gone.

When she attempted to walk to her truck, he pulled her back, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and escorting the woman to his Blazer.

"Yeah, no, you're not driving like this," he said, pulling open his passenger side door. "Get in."

Molly stepped into the space between the door and the car, staring at Hopper defiantly. "I'm fine, Jim."

Using the heel of his palm, he pushed gently on her shoulder. Molly immediately collapsed into the seat. Even when drunk – which had been rare for the teacher – she'd had better balance. The woman wasn't lying when she said she got no sleep.

"Sure thing, Molly," he replied, unable to help the small smile that was creeping on his face. "Get your legs in. C'mon."

Reminding him very much of some girls he used to go to school with, Molly stuck her tongue out at him before slowly complying. He still nearly got her hair caught in the door when he shut it.

When he entered his side of the vehicle, Molly was already curled up against the window, eyes closed and arms wrapped around herself as her jacket dripped water onto the seat and the floor. He watched her for a moment, wondering if she hadn't fallen asleep already.

She'd been so determined to keep looking. If he hadn't said they'd left Hawkins, Molly would have kept going. Hell, she was probably tempted to keep going anyway. Never mind that she was on the verge of collapse. Will was missing and she was ready to move heaven and earth to find him again.

All the while, he had been barely willing to start looking.

He never used to be that guy.

Sighing, Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose before reaching into

his jacket, pulling out his small prescription bottle.

"Do you have enough for the whole class?"

He turned to find Molly watching him, her eyes barely open as she continued to rest against the window.

"It's far too early for the teacher gimmick," Hopper replied, pouring out a couple pills and tossing them into his mouth. His tongue tossed them around for a bit before he swallowed them; his mouth felt like cotton. When was the last time he drank something?

"Sorry. This is how I get with a lack of sleep," Molly said, sitting up and leaning back into the seat. "What was that? Tuinal?"

Hopper nodded and Molly chuckled.

"I used to pop those like Pez back in school, and a little after."

"The after got anything to do with him?"

He didn't need to say who. That was the thing with them: they never needed specifics. They both knew what the other was referring to. Hopper didn't want to go so far as to say that they knew each other that well, as opposed to the fact that neither of them interacted with more than a handful of people.

But sometimes he imagined it meant something.

Like how he knew enough to realize he'd gone too far with that question.

"Sorry," he said when the silence had gone long enough. "That was… inappropriate."

When she didn't reply, he got ready to start the engine, thoroughly embarrassed and quietly cursing himself. He couldn't help it. Molly, for all her willingness to talk, never actually said anything, nothing specific that was. He could name everything he knew about her on one hand, and half of that came from her yelling at him earlier that day.

He knew more about the drunks he locked up in the jail than the woman he consistently flirted with.

"Yeah," she said, leaving his key hovering just short of the ignition. "It did."

Hopper glanced at Molly. She'd taken that ring out and was toying around with it, staring out the window.

Well, now he was just an ass.

"I'm sorry, Jim."

He blinked. "Come again?

Molly snorted, actually smiling. "You don't get many apologies, do you?"

"I'm pretty sure I can trace my last apology to some crackhead in New York City."

She shook her head, though the smile didn't disappear. "You're right about me. I don't tell anyone anything, and I really shouldn't be surprised when that blows up in my face. It's just…talking about myself…it's not my favorite thing to do."

He could relate.

The thing was, he shouldn't have been able to.

Molly was this vibrant, energetic, caring, gorgeous woman who should have consistently been the talk of the town. She should have been good friends with damn near every woman within city limits, heading all sorts of their functions, and instead she decided to spend time with the drunk veteran chief who couldn't be bothered to care for nearly as much as he should.

Losing her fiancé was one thing, but Hopper knew there was something else missing.

He wouldn't ask though; he wasn't *that* stupid.

"So tell me something I don't know about you," he suggested, watching her confused look. "Make it up to me."

Molly thought about it. "I was a cheerleader at Ohio State."

Hopper snorted. Of course she was.

"Did you date the captain of the football team too?"

"Of course not," she countered, giving him the side eye. "He was just a wide receiver."

He didn't think he'd laugh on a day like today, yet somehow Molly always surprised him.

They kept talking about college, him mercilessly teasing her as fatigue all but rendered her defenses useless, but she didn't seem to mind. The distraction was good for them. It helped make the last two months mean nothing; it helped make the last two hours easier.

For a few moments, everything was the same again.

Molly woke with a terrible crick in her neck, a throbbing head, and a chill that continuously ran through her body. Though her eyes were still closed, she could see the bright light attempting to penetrate her eyelids and groaned, wondering what she had done the night before to earn such a rude awakening.

When she attempted to readjust – and search for her blanket – Molly became acutely aware that she was, in fact, not resting in her bed. Nor was she in a chair, or anything remotely comfortable or within the vicinity of her house.

When she finally gathered the courage to crack an eye open, she realized she was resting on a window, in a vehicle that wasn't hers, on the side of the road.

Her mind slowly began to piece the day before together. She had been searching for Will, tired beyond measure; she had stopped in Hopper's vehicle, presumably so he could give her a ride, because she had class the next day and…

Shit.

Molly bolted upright, glancing down at her watch. It was seven thirty.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

Hopper sat up in his seat as she shouted, startled, the hat once covering his face falling into his lap as he fumbled for his weapon. Molly ignored him as she threw the door to his Blazer open and all but fell out of the vehicle.

"Where the hell is my truck?!" she shouted at nothing in particular, turning to see it roughly half a block down the road. She bolted it, nearly dropping her keys twice as she fumbled for the right one.

Before Hopper had even emerged from his Blazer, Molly had shut herself in the cab of her truck and started the engine. It roared to life, the stick cranking smoothly into place as she put it in drive. She would have peeled out entirely had the chief not flagged her down by waving his arms.

"Hey, you could at least try to pretend I'm a police officer," Hopper said as she rolled down her window.

Molly revved her engine in response, grinning, despite her frantic state, at the look on Hopper's face.

Rather than flee back home, which was on the other side of town, Molly pulled up to Benny's, choosing to use his phone to call the school and plead her case rather than physically appear in the office. She had no idea what her appearance was, but her guess was somewhere south of vagrant, and decided that it didn't need to be fuel for anyone's future publications.

Given how close his restaurant was to the search area, Molly had been surprised by his absence at the party. She figured he and the boys must have been up late talking about basketball, probably ignoring the phone entirely. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Molly threw open the side door that led to his kitchen, knowing full well that it would be unlocked. Much like her, the man had late

nights and early mornings. How either of them functioned was a question they chose not to answer.

"Hey, Benny, I'm using your phone!" she shouted, crossing the kitchen to just behind his front counter, where the device in question sat on the wall. "I'll pay you if it makes you feel better!"

She began to dial the familiar number. There were mostly tests that day. If she got home and cleaned up fast enough, she would be able to at least cover the afternoon classes, and hopefully not fall asleep during them.

Principal Coleman would probably ask for some food. His wife was out of town and he was completely useless in the kitchen. It was extortion, and she accepted that; it was also partially why she had stopped at Benny's. She knew how things worked.

"You know, we really could have used you yesterday!" she called, resting the phone against her ear and listening to the ring. "Joyce's boy is missing. You know, Will."

Molly looked around the area, noting the mess that had been left behind. Some dishes weren't done, and other utensils were notably out of place. Benny had a particular way he did things, and tended to get upset if anyone decided to mess with that established routine.

Hopper tried once, and thus they were banned from drinking in the restaurant.

"Jesus, Benny, this place looks like shit," she said, turning to look for her silent friend in the dining area. "What the hell were you up to last-"

Molly didn't scream when she saw the body. In fact, she didn't do much of anything. She only stood there, staring, feeling a deep cold creep up her spine.

"Hawkins Middle School. How may I direct your call?" Marge's voice droned over the line. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

"Marge," she whispered. "Call the police."

She knew.

In the time she languished in that silent restaurant, waiting for authorities to arrive, Molly came to the solemn conclusion that something was going terribly wrong in Hawkins.

And it had everything to do with the place she came from.

Benny's death always hits me the hardest. Least screen time, most pain. Go figure.

Until next time!